

“Blessing the Space Between Us” - FUUSB Caring & Belonging Retreat Report

WHO: Planning Team - Sarah Russell, Martha Molpus, Rev. Tricia Hart, Erika Reif, Rev. David Ruffin (Facilitator). Retreat with leaders and members of Pastoral Care Associates, Care Network Team, Membership Team, and Healthy Congregation Team, Small Group Ministry Coordinators and Staff who work with families, children, and youth.

WHEN: Wednesday Sept. 30, 2020, 1:00-4:30 pm

WHAT: Members of the Caring and Belonging teams were invited to gather under the Memorial Garden canopy, and via ZOOM, for a retreat of renewal and visioning for the year to come. I, David Ruffin, guided approx. 20 gathered in sharing of present longings and past and recent experiences of belonging as a way to reconnect with what’s at the heart of the FUUSB community. We then built upon this with a collaborative visioning process about how Caring and Belonging team members can yet work together, across different teams, and across social distances, to share what was identified as most core to the FUUSB community with as many in the community as possible over the coming months of persistent pandemic norms. The group arrived at a vision and committed to realizing it. The vision now needs further clarification and a strategic action plan.

AGENDA: PART I - CONNECTING

Arriving/ Centering / Chalice Lighting

Opening Reading - “In Gathering” by Marta Valentin

Welcome/Introductory words/Overview of afternoon

Song - “Come Come Whoever You Are” (Brian Haas)

Check In

- Name/Pronouns/Why here (what team)
- Feelings you’re bringing with you
- “A way something has blessed the space between us” (love met you in the gaps)

Poem - “Perhaps the World Ends Here” by Joy Harjo

Questions for writing exercise / small group sharing:

- What are you deeply longing for right now? (for writing exercise)
- How have you experienced powerful belonging in your life or at FUUSB? (for sharing in small groups)

Small Group Breakout Groups Sharing BREAK // PART II - VISIONING

Readings

- > Margaret Weis "The Church Has Left the Building"
- > FUUSB Mission and Vision

Large Group Harvest (from small groups) - Themes/takeaways re: how our longings have been met through care/belonging experiences (esp. at FUUSB). What's going well/what has gone well within various teams.

Vision Building / Paint the Picture - Our Society is a place where...
"What does it look like, feel like, smell like?"

Small Group Brain, Heart & Soul "Storming" / Dreaming

"Yes, And!" game approach with small group sharing

Large Group Harvest - Pick 2-3 compelling ideas to share

Distilling Visioning and Small Group Sharing - What's Core and possible (SMART)

CLOSING / CHECK OUT - Commitments / Gratuities

Chalice Extinguishing

NOTES FROM GROUP PROCESS:

What has it looked and felt like to be living out the Mission/Vision of FUUSB?

Being together w/ like-minded people	No rehearsal pageant
Youth Group Meetings	Sanctuary of Peace and Quiet
Youth Group Service Trip to NY	Game Night
Warm conversation with a friend	Service of Loss and Remembrance
Attending Services	Bazaar
Vigils on Wednesday Evenings	Concerts in Building
Most beautiful building in Burlington	Soup!
Coffeehouse and Potlucks	Choir singing Missa Gaia
Thought-provoking Sermons	AA meetings in community spaces
Classes for Children	Laughter and tears
Christmas Eve Candle-light service	Goodbyes
Christmas morning breakfast	Memorial Services

Shared Silence
Phone call or meal
Hand to hold
Kids high-fiving new members
Stories for all ages
Sam's Piano Playing and his smile
Service Projects
Vespers services
Small groups

Pride Parade
Theme Circles
BLM banner and Vigils
Learning how to deal with White
Supremacy
Taking home Bob's vegetables after
service
Tricia's guidance

"What's at the Heart of It?" (Caring & Belonging @ FUUSB) (Bolded my emphasis)

- Being Together (In Person!)
- Connecting in **Small Groups** (Intimately / Deeper level)
- Small Groups that welcome New People "in"
- Sense of "Neighborhood" (SE neighborhood group)
- **1 on 1 connection** (buddy system, repeated phone calls/facetimes_)
- Interpersonal Buddy / **Relationship** building
- **Sharing Grief**
- Vespers Services / Small group, sharing deeply, **Music**
- Experiences of Knowing *You Matter*
- Being asked, "**How Are You?**"
- **Listening** / "To feel really heard means Deep Listening is necessary"
- Sharing Our UU *Faith* Community (UUism) / Sharing the **Sacred**
 - Story of just listening to Chopin together as sharing sacred experience

Some ideas of how to do this in these times...

- Everyone Contacted - Checking in on Everybody
- Getting Needs Surfaced
- (Intergenerational) buddy system, "*how are you?*" - 1 on 1 connection
- Example of Springfield program "Beacons" ~ Call 25 people in a year
- Emailing and Phone Calls (repeated?)
- Sending Cards (has been very meaningful, made by adults and kids both)
- Making a Greater Effort (*not enough to just ask what people need*)
- Small group in which you're automatically "IN" (default= IN, you have to "opt out")
 - Lynn's story of being assigned a group in a large church. Groups met for all kinds of activities. You never got to church and didn't know people.
- Restorative Listening Circles (reconciliation process)
- Welcoming work = awesome. "But we stop." Extending this process → Membership *Development* (accompanying members on journey of belonging)
- OnBoarding Cohorts (welcoming group sticks together, for years even)

- Sunday Service “Watch Party” Small Groups (in person or via zoom) & discuss

Brain (Heart) Storming / Free-Visioning / Big Dreaming

- Having In-Person Worship (and other activities)
 - Bigger Tent with Heaters / Permanent Outdoor Space for Worship
- Small Groups Meet in the Meeting House
- FUUSB Podcast programming
- Informal Meetups
- Zoom Classes for Knitting, etc.
- Rolling Service Auction
- Weeklong Retreats
- Access to Zoom for All
- Organic Groups w/ Resources
- Ambassador Cards - Contact Info
- Play & Creative Space
- New Member Mentors

FINAL (DISTILLED) CORE VISION FROM EACH GROUP:

- Web of Connection / Every member (or family group) contacted (Phone Tree)
- Meet-Up Style Small Groups - Multiple modalities
- Familial Groups, everyone involved
- Small Group Meetings - Both Virtual and In-Person (Other)
- Connection as Prayer, Prayer as Connection

Reflections and Recommendations for Leaders of Caring & Belonging Teams

I felt that the group who gathered really zoomed in well (no pun intended) on the key elements of what would support the experience of Caring and Belonging at FUUSB in these times. The conclusion to which I heard retreat participants collectively arrive, is a vision for action that, I believe, the Caring and Belonging Teams and Staff can indeed bring to life. I was thrilled, particularly, that small groups were so clearly identified as a core foundation to the experience of caring and belonging at FUUSB, but especially in these socially distanced times.

Throughout the afternoon, behind the final vision for action, I heard these core elements of a guiding vision of Caring and Belonging at FUUSB articulated:

- *Small group and 1-on-1 belonging experiences*
- Supporting sustained *Relationship*
- Deep Connection / Deep *Listening*
- Knowing and being known by others
- Being reached out to, e.g. cards, calls, shawls, etc. (not having to ask for help)
- Sharing Grief and Sharing JOY (play, music, food, etc.)
- Sharing sacred experience / sacred practices
- Sharing the work of building the world we dream of (caring, justice and service)

In the work of distilling a core vision moving forward, I heard three main ideas emerge:

- 1) Crafting a way for everyone in the community to be contacted and then also enlisted in the process of contacting others (a web of connection)
- 2) Creating and overseeing a process by which everyone in the congregation is brought together into a small group of some kind with whom they are regularly meeting in a way that feels safe and nourishing to all involved
- 3) Inviting the whole community into a shared practice of conceiving of connection as prayer and prayer as connection / The intention of connecting as sacred work.

These envisioned priorities seem to me naturally interdependent, that is to say mutually supportive. I think moving forward with all of them is the way to go. I would also lift up, though, that it was no accident that three out of the five groups zeroed in on small groups as the primary vehicle for caring and belonging at this time. This focus on small groups, I would reflect, was the core “Ah, Ha” of the retreat.

In my judgment, if the Caring and Belonging teams embark upon a coordinated effort to match every member of the community with at least one small group that is committed to meeting regularly (somehow) in ways that fit their Covid and connection needs, and if the C&B teams then find a way to support these groups in acting like FUUSB “family” to one another, getting through these times *together*, that would have game-changing implications for the experience of Caring and Belonging for many at FUUSB. This would be so amidst the immediate challenges of winter to come and also very much so in the long run, as well. Inviting a sacred framing for living out this vision, and grounding this goal with the supportive goal / strategy of contacting every community member to share this vision and invite their participation, all seems complementary.

My recommendation is that the next step would be to gather leaders of the Caring and Belonging teams together for a second round of clarifying this vision and planning on how to bring it to life, as soon as possible. There were a number of very good and potentially complementary ideas of how small groupings could be framed. I heard, for example, in addition to chalice/theme circles, “meet-up” style groups and Sunday Service watch groups, and onboarding cohorts, and automatic “familial” groups. It’s important for C&B team leaders to get clear about which small group approaches they’d like to try and employ at this time. All the various ideas may well have their season!

It sounds like many on C&B teams have had powerful experiences of the particular value of a *sacred* sharing space for deeper, authentic, heart-to-heart, sharing. That feels like an important piece of the vision to keep an eye on, even as you remember the bottom line is getting people connected in a way that will easefully work for them.

Similarly, supporting spaces in which FUUSB members are getting to deepen in relationship, asking one another “how are you?” *really*, and really listening, seems to be at the heart of this. Authentic relationship is a foundational goal to support care and belonging.

Sharing joy and play also seems really important, though. It could be that the best of possible outcomes would be that most small groups were committing to a kind of sacred deep sharing practice and something more active, light and fun.

Finally, I just want to reflect back that the proposal of gathering groups around watching a service together, somehow, and then sharing together at that time felt important. I could imagine this being quite a powerful initiative to launch for the upcoming year, and who knows where it might lead in the future?

Generally, my recommendation would be to create a program that has both a simple common anchor in which you hope most everyone in the community will participate, and then to support flexibility and creative diversity of expression for these groups from there.

The next round of planning, of course, needs careful care and focus, in order to arrive at an actionable plan (a SMART GOAL). This is, in effect, the “Second Half” of the Retreat Visioning process we anticipated we wouldn’t be able to quite reach in just one afternoon session. But the important thing is that leaders of these teams now have not only a core vision to act upon, and a whole host of great ideas of how it might be realized, but also the commitment of all retreat participants to work together to realize this vision. Hammering out the next steps will more easily be done with a smaller dedicated group anyway, in my judgment. You are equipped!

And, if you want further support for this step, I’m here and would be glad to come alongside you for any next phases of the process. I’m cheering you on, either way.

I think you all are well on your way to blessing the (unfortunately necessary) space between community members at FUUSB in the months to come, and making way for love to fill the gaps that all of us are experiencing. I’ve been honored to be a part of the process thus far.

Don’t hesitate to reach out for any further discussion as would be supportive.

Gratefully,
David

APPENDIX:

In Gatherings

...we are stirred
like the leaves of the fall season
rustling around sacred trees,
tossed hither and yon
until we come to rest together,
quietly, softly . . .
We come to gather strength from each other.
We come to give strength to each other.
When our hearts sing or when they frown
it is the way of compassion telling us to give.
...for we are happiest
and most powerful
when Love is made apparent
in and through us.

Spirit of the -circle that is Love,
Thank you for reminding us that—
with a searching glance,
a generous smile,
a thoughtful word...
we are always building our beloved comunidad.

Thank you for reminding us
that through our cov-e-nant with you
we cov-e-nant with each “other”
and are made whole.
We discover who we are,
separate from each other
and within one another.

In this -circle that holds all life
may we ever work -toward
widening its boundaries

until there are none.

Rev. Marta I. Valentin

The hunger to belong is at the heart of our nature. Cut off from others, we atrophy and turn in on ourselves. The sense of belonging is the natural balance of our lives... There is some innocent childlike side to the human heart that is always deeply hurt when we are excluded... When we become isolated, our minds lose their flexibility and natural kindness; we become vulnerable to fear and negativity. The ancient and eternal values of human life — truth, unity, goodness, justice, beauty, and love — are all statements of true belonging. They are ~~the~~ also the secret intention and dream of human longing...

Still, the restlessness in the human heart will never be finally stilled by any person, project, or place. As Shakespeare said, we have “immortal longings.” This is what constantly qualifies and enlarges our circles of belonging. Longing and creativity are interwoven. ...When longing dies, creativity ceases.

The arduous task of being a human is to balance longing and belonging so that they work with and against each other to ensure that all the potential and gifts that sleep in the clay of the heart may be awakened and realized in this one life.

—John O’Donohue

Perhaps the World Ends Here

BY [JOY HARJO](#)

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

Our Mission, Values and Ends

As a congregation, we unite in our mission to **inspire spiritual growth, to care for each other and our community, to seek truth, and to act for justice.**

Guided by our core First UU values—love, service, openness and respect, we work towards these visionary ends:

FUUSB uses its power as an organization and faith community to work for **social, economic and environmental justice.**

FUUSB's welcoming worship, supported by powerful and diverse music and art, acts as a magnet that fosters **spiritual growth, compassion, introspection and impetus to action.**

FUUSB is a compassionate community, offering all who engage in its ministries a profound sense of welcome, belonging, and spiritual care through life's joys, struggles, and sacred passages.

FUUSB provides diverse opportunities for transformational spiritual growth, faith development and personal discovery, promoting life-long learning for all ages and stages of life.

FUUSB generously stewards our mission and strongly supports ministries, activities and an historic building and spaces.

“Maxine and Lyle”

In 1945, Lyle came home from the war, the only veteran to return alive to the small town in Iowa he'd left to go to the Western Front. The day he arrived home, the whole town came out to meet him. When the train pulled into the station, the band played. Family and friends waved and cheered, and the mayor stood ready to greet him. But the man who climbed off the train was not the cheerful, high-spirited boy who had gone off to war. In response to the music and cheers, he stared back, mutely. His blank face did not register recognition of anyone--not mother, sister, or friend.

Lyle's family took him home to their farm. He sat in the rocker in the parlor. He wouldn't speak, he wouldn't sleep, and he would barely eat. No one in that town knew what was wrong. They just knew that Lyle's soul was lost somewhere.

Lyle had a sister, Maxine, who decided to keep her brother company. Whenever she could she'd sit in the parlor with him. When she ran out of things to say, she'd just sit with him quietly, snapping beans or mending socks. Lyle was like a stone. No expression on his face.

It went on like this for days that flowed into weeks and on into months. Then one night, late, after everyone else had gone to bed, Maxine was sitting with Lyle, quietly knitting, when the eyes in Lyle's still face filled with tears. The tears spilled over and began to run down his face. Maxine noticed. She got up and put her arms around her brother. Held in his sister's embrace, Lyle began to cry full force, great gusts of sobbing, and Maxine held him. Then he began to talk. He talked of the noise, the cold, the smoke, the death of his buddies. And then he spoke of the camps, the mass graves, the smell. He talked all night. Maxine listened.

When the morning light came across the fields, she went to the kitchen and cooked him breakfast. He ate. Then he went out and did the morning chores.

—*Proverbs of Ashes* by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock